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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews Native American materials on current Canadian textbook lists and discusses a new anthology of works by and about Canada Natives. The "Circle Program," a kit of story books and English-as-a-Second-Language instructional materials for Native children in grades K-3, is recommended for children of all cultures and backgrounds. However, only 15 Native-oriented books for grades 6-12 are listed on the Canadian language arts textbook list and the Manitoba Department of Education, which has a special branch devoted to Native instructional materials, has only a few more. One reason for this scarcity is that Native literature is usually published in limited numbers by small publishing houses and quickly goes out of print. "Our Bit of Truth," edited by Agnes Grant, is a new anthology of Native literature that addresses the difficulty teachers experience in obtaining literature for classroom use. The works are organized under the various genres commonly found in language arts courses. Every genre has entries at varied reading levels, compiled with the interest levels of grades 7-12 in mind. A total of 37 different culture groups from all areas of Canada are represented. In an effort to counter the stereotyped roles usually assigned to Native peoples, a wide variety of traditional and contemporary experiences are portrayed. This paper contains a bibliography with 34 entries. (SV)

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OUR BIT OF TRUTH:
Voices of Native People in Classroom Literature

by

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I have been doing presentations and workshops on Native literature in elementary and high school curricula for many years. Sometimes it seems as though no changes are taking place, at other times I have to remind myself that there really has been a lot of progress.

When I did my Master's thesis in 1976 I quoted reading experts who pointed out that the reading programs which relied on readers only were not enough to teach children to be proficient readers. Children's experiences and cultural views must be represented in books or enthusiasm for reading will be hard to generate.[1] I included a bibliography of literature pertaining to Native children which was later published by the Manitoba Department of Education.

This bibliography is now quite outdated. Some of these books I no longer recommend because my understanding of racism and sexism has grown over the years. Some entries had questionable literary value and better quality books are now available. Many are out of print so unless copies are found in libraries they are not available.

Other books I would endorse as heartily today as I did then, books like Ann Blades A Boy of Tache, Ann Nolan Clark, Blue Canyon Horse, Elizabeth Cleaver, How Summer Came to Canada, Cliff Faulknor, White Calf and The White Peril, Susan Heibert, Alphonse Has an Accident, Grace Jackson Penny, Moki and Helen Rushmore, The Magnificant House of Man Alone. Some writers you can always depend on to produce interesting and accurate materials, writers like James Houston and Barbara Smucker.

When I did my Ph.D. thesis in 1985, I wrote

> In 1982-83, the only authorized textbook for

> Language Arts and English for Grades VII to XII in the province of Manitoba is I Am an Indian, a book of collected works by Native writers. This situation improved somewhat with the revised provincial curriculum; the novel April Raintree by Beatrice Culleton is on the curriculum, as is a comparative mythology text that includes Indian legends--When the Morning Stars Sang Together by John S. Morgan. Penny Petrone's excellent First People, First Voices, a collection of historical writing by Native people is suggested as a teacher reference. Unfortunately, Indian's Don't Cry by George Kenny, a book of short stories and poems by a young Indian, which not only expresses the emotions of today's adolescents but also serves as a model for young, contemporary writers, is listed only under "Native Education Material".[2]

As I began to prepare for this workshop I thought I should check and see what the current textbook list looks like, naively assuming, I suppose, that if there were changes from 1976 to 1985 there would be further progress from 1985 to 1991.

I found that there is nothing on the Language Arts curriculum by Native writers or even pertaining to Native culture until Grade IV where two items are listed which I assume could be Native legends--The Beaver's Flat Tail and The Moose's Loose Coat.

There is, however, some culture specific material under the English as a Second Language heading. Recommended is the Circle Program [3] which has excellent language development materials. The art work does not appeal to everyone; a kindergartner recently asked me why people don't have eyes in these books.

Apart from the unusual art work, the kit is generally considered excellent. The stories are about Native children on a reserve, the environment is familiar and the activities common. Skidoos, ice-fishing, airplanes, guitars, bannock, tea, oil drums and band offices abound. But there are also rocket ships and roast chicken, parkas and plastic cups, motorcycles and mini-vans.

The kit has been developed for the first three years of schooling and incorporates all we know about inducing children to read. The stories use language patterns, repetition and progressively difficult vocabulary, but the tone is never patronizing. The stories are realistic and heartwarming. The situations are familiar but there is always enough of a twist to keep readers, both teachers and pupils, intrigued. In Lots to Do[4], the story "Let's Go" shows the children using their imaginations as they play with oil drums, chairs and cardboard boxes to eventually get to the moon "by rocket".

The Circle Program was published by Fitzhenry and Whiteside in 1985. Authors include Barbara Burnaby who is well-known for her scholarship in the development of second language materials. It includes sets of story books, work sheets, patterns and cassette tape recordings by the poet, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, so children can read along.

Rosie's Feast is only one example of the many good books in

the kit. Rosie walks to the feast with her grandparents. Other people go by skidoo. The feast is in the hall where Rosie's parents are busy preparing food and setting up tables. Funny Uncle John is there. They begin the meal with a prayer and the elders eat first. Then the music and dancing begins. And Uncle John hams it up.

> Then the girls saw something even funnier across the room. Uncle John was dancing too. And he was wearing big, old slippers on his feet! He looked so funny! Everyone began to laugh.

Sometimes Rosie danced and "sometimes she just sat down for a rest", on her granny's lap.

In the end she fell asleep and we see funny Uncle John carrying her into the house.[5]

This kit is not listed in the regular Language Arts curriculum but I believe it would be excellent for children from all cultures and backgrounds.

After Grade IV, there is nothing pertaining to Natives in Grade V but in Grade VI we find Spirit of the White Bison by Beatrice Culleton and A Very small Rebellion by Jan Truss. In Grade VII we have Island of the Blue Dolphins by O'Dell and Julie of the Wolves by Craighead George.

In Grade VIII we have The Indian Summer of Arty Bigjim and Johnny Jack by D. Fossey, Light in the Fort by Richler, No Word for Goodbye by Craig and Winners by Collura. Grave IX still has Craven's I Heard the Owl Call My Name, German's Breed Apart and Cutler's I Once Knew an Indian Woman. In Grade X we find April

Raintree by Beatrice Culleton, in Grade XI, Old Wives' Lake by Fry and in Grade XII, The Ecstasy of Rita Joe by Ryga and Peace Shall Destroy Many by Rudy Wiebe. Wiebe's book is often presented as a book dealing with Native people but in reality it deals only with how Mennonite people viewed the Metis in their community.

So, what have all these books got in common? They do have Native people in them, but with the exception of Beatrice Culleton, they are written by non-Natives. I'm not criticizing the choices except when Peace Shall Destroy Many is portrayed as a book about Natives. I am also getting a little weary of The Ecstasy of Rita Joe because it is so one-sided and has little that is authentically Native in it.

What I am criticizing is the fact that Native writers are not represented. It is very hard for Native writers to get published and to get established as Canadian writers. They do not necessarily write in the style of mainstream literature so are often ignored. What I wrote in 1983 is still true; only Beatrice Culleton is found on the curriculum.

But there is some hope, at least in Manitoba. We have a branch of the Department of Education called the Native Education Branch. It works specifically on developing materials for Natives and acts in an advisory capacity in all areas of the curriculum. The Textbook Bureau catalogue contains at least ten pages of materials for Native students but much of it is in the area of Native languages and Social Studies materials. But there is also a section on Language Arts.

Most of the books previously mentioned on the regular Language Arts lists are entered again, but more are included. Native

writers like Bernalda Wheeler, Murdo Scribe, Esther Sanderson, Caroline Flett and Winston Wuttunee are found at the junior levels. Marhoosie, Harpoon of the Hunter, Slipperjack, Honour the Sun, George Kenny, October Stranger, Wolfe, Earth Elder Stories, Jordan Wheeler, Brothers in Arms, Basil Johnston, Moose Meat and Wild Rice and Jeanette Armstrong, Slash are found at the higher grade levels as well as the anthologies All My Relations and Writing the Circle.

I teach Secondary Language Arts methods courses to groups of largely Native teachers. I give a wide variety of assignments on various Language Arts skills--from choral speaking to simulation games to word attack techniques. In all cases, unless I specify otherwise, students use Native literature to do their assignments.

I am struck again and again by their excitement about literature from their own culture group. Many of our teacher trainees now have complete Grade XII, and many are very knowledgeable about Who Has Seen the Wind, or Death of a Salesman or The Doll House but they have not had the opportunity to learn from Slash or Brothers in Arms or All my Relations.

One of the reasons for the scarcity of Native literature in Language Arts programs is the availability of materials. Much of the Native literature is published by smaller publishing houses and limited numbers of books are printed. When they are sold, the books go out of print. Few make it to the "best seller" list so reprinting of books is not common.

There always are exceptions though, Halfbreed by Maria Campbell and Moose Meat and Wild Rice by Basil Johnston are published by McClelland and Stewart and have been reprinted. Pemmican Publications and Theytus Books have a steady supply of

their books.

So, one of the reasons for the "birth" of Our Bit of Truth was because of the difficulty teachers experience in obtaining literature for classroom use. I have taught Oral Narratives and Native Literature to prospective teachers for many years and they leave university quite enthusiastic about teaching Native literature. Then reality hits them and I get phone calls--"None of this literature is in the library", or at best, "There is one copy" or "So many books are out of print", or "It will take all year to get the books".

The idea for Our Bit of Truth began when I did my M.Ed., began to take more concrete shape and form when I did my Ph.D. dissertation. Many, many people have contributed along the way, especially the students I have taught. They helped clarify my thinking and pointed the directions to what kind of literature and what kind of authors should be represented.

I knew an anthology was needed that could be used in the classroom and it would have to have a wide variety of content and reading levels. This book is not the solution to the problem of what to teach,but it is one answer among many. And Pemmican Publications has kept the price down to $19.95.

The title of the book, Our Bit of Truth comes from a poem on page 315, by Sheila Erickson.

don't rhyme the words too closely
when you tell our story
leave time and space for us to install
our bit of truth
to add another line or word

each man his own
each nation its paragraph
leave room for us to chant and mourn
and mimic the roll of the buffalo herds
or shake the fish skin rattle
don't rhyme the words too closely[6]

Sheila Erickson is a Cree poet who eloquently asks non-Native readers, writers and publishers to allow Native people to write their own literature. But that is not enough. Native poets and authors have long been producing good materials. It doesn't do much good if students in schools and universities are not given the opportunity to read and study this literature.

I attempted to cover as wide a range of Canadian writing as possible--though I will admit to a bias in favour of Manitoba writing. Students from different tribal groups and geographic areas will find something of interest.

The book is organized under the various genre found in usual Language Arts courses--myth/legend, traditional poetry, memoirs, biography/autobiography, short stories, excerpts from novels and contemporary poetry. Only drama is missing.

Myths/legends include 12 different tribal groups while traditional poetry represents 27. Memoirs come from the Plains Cree, Metis, Shuswap, Saulteaux and Slavey. Biographies/autobiographies come from Saulteaux, Plains Cree, James Bay Cree, Eskimo, Metis and Ojibway.

The preface is written by a Blackfoot woman and the conclusion by a Sioux so altogether, 37 different culture groups are represented coming from all areas of Canada--the North, the West

Coast, the Prairie Provinces, Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes.

Another aspect of the book is that it is gender-balanced, that is, of all the entries where authorship or collector is known, 41 are male and 40 are female. So often, especially in historical writing, I ask "But what were the women doing?" It is interesting to note, in this regard, that the earlier works--collecting legends, recording legends, setting down memoirs, was largely a male occupation but female writers predominate in contemporary novels and poetry.

The reading levels of the selections in this book vary greatly and I did that deliberately. I had the interest levels of Grades VII-XII students in mind as I selected the entries. The reading levels can vary greatly among high school students especially when adults come back to finish their education. I wanted to be sure students of different reading abilities could read the selections, but also that those of higher abilities were challenged. Every genre has entries at different reading levels.

For example, in myths/legends, there is wide variety in "How the Human People Got the First Fire", "A Peigan Creation Myth" and "Nanabush Kitchi Manitou's Emissary.[7] Even the titles themselves vary in reading difficulty.

For easier reading, short sentences with simple construction are necessary. I will compare the first two sentences in these three myths:

1. It has been said there was no fire at all amongst the human people. No one had fire, except the Wolf people.
2. Long ago, the Spirits above sent the Great Water to flood the world below where men and women used to live.

Afterwards, Napiwa, the Old Man, created our floating island from a grain of sand in the following manner.

3. Nanabush was born of a human mother, sired by a spirit, Epingishmook, (The West). Like his older brothers, Mudjiekawis, Pa[illegible]ekawis, and Chibiabos, Nanabush possessed supernatural powers and was spirit in nature.

I would do a similar comparison for the various genre.

I also wanted to include a variety of challenges in the concepts presented so the book could be used for a wider range of students. Again, every genre includes different levels. The biographical excerpt from George Barber's Forty Years a Chief is quite straightforward as he tells about his childhood in the Wanipigow area.[8] On the other hand, Verna Patronella Johnston's biography, I am Nohomis, Too speaks of cultural adjustment to city life and of the difficulty of trying to go back home again.[9]

I also attempted, in this book, to portray as wide a variety of experiences as possible. Native people have been portrayed in very narrow, limited roles due to stereotyping in the past.

Even in the best literature, like The Ecstasy of Rita Joe they are portrayed as helpless victims, caught between two cultures and not able to function in either. Rita Joe and Jamie Paul cannot cope in the city and David Paul, the elder, is unable to help them. There are no capable, successful Native people in Rita Joe's city.. In Peace Shall Destroy Many we find only poverty-stricken, law-breaking Metis. In Margaret Laurence's books we find only the poor Metis living in the valley and the foot-loose fancy-free musician who is unable to form permanent relationships. Old Wives' Lake portrays the warring Plains tribes, killing each other off. These

portrayals are quite accurate but give only limited insights into the lives of Native people and if only this literature is studied, perceptions remain stereotyped.

I have tried, in both historical and contemporary entries, to present as many situations and role models as possible. Ethel Gardner's story of the little girl Ack-koo, who has a harelip, is quite different from the young men who are bewitched by the old woman in Dan Kennedy's story. The "stereotype" of the Indian Brave who paddles canoes endlessly is portrayed as a real human being in "The Legend of the Qu'Appelle Valley", a human being who works, loves and mourns as do other people. These young men are portrayed in another role as Chief Thunderchild tells of their favorite leisure-time occupation--foot racing.

A lullaby for a girl in the Tsimshian culture was quite different from lullaby for a boy in the Inuit culture

Song (Tsimshian)

She will pick wild roses, the little girl.

That is why she was born.
She will dig up wild rice with her index
finger, the little girl
That is why she was born.
She will gather the sap of young hemlock trees
in the early spring.
That is why she was born.
She will pick strawberries in the early spring.
That is why she was born.
She will, the women, pick up blueberries in

the early spring.

She will pick strawberries in the early spring.

She will pick elderberries in the early spring.

She will pick wild roses in the early spring.

That is why she was born.

That is why she was born.[10]

It makes one tired, just reading it, doesn't it? Compare it with the Inuit lullaby.

Petting Song (Inuit).

How charming he is, that little pet there!

How charming he is--

How amazing he is, the dear little creature!

How bland he is and gentle, the treat little one there!

How bland he is and gentle--

How amazing he is, the dear little creature!

How sound he looks and vigorous, the great little thing there!

How sound he looks and vigorous!

How amazing he is, the dear little creature.[11]

Tom Baulanger tells of his deeply-held spiritual beliefs and his life on the trapline[12] while John Tetso tells of photographing a moose![13]

Eleanor Brass tells of daily life on the Peepeekisis Reserve[14] while Augusta Tappage tells about learning her medical skills from a book she ordered from Eatons.[15]

Contemporary writers write short stories, novels and poetry on themes ranging from conflict with non-Native society, to acceptance of homosexuality, to fear of leaving the home community to get an education, to anxiety over nuclear damage. Young people have to choose between parents living a traditional, isolated life and the lure of city lights. Rights of Status Indians are dealt with as well as placing kids for adoption. Eleanor Brass' story tells of a non-Native child placed with Indian parents and the child's identity crisis[16], Beatrice Culleton tells of Metis children in non-Native foster homes.[17]

Not all the themes, however, are sombre. Basil Johnston tells of the nervousness of a young man planning to kiss his girlfriend (in Humphrey Bogart style)[18], Bruce Sealey tells of the effects of a Weetigo on a Frontier School Division community[19] and Richard Delaronde and William Stevenson effectively portray the frustration as their Model T sputters and dies.[20]

There are no stereotypes in this book, because each person and each situation is different.

There is an introduction to the book, written by myself, which addresses Native literature in general and every chapter has specific introductory comments, also written by myself. These comments are intended to assist all teachers, Native or non-Native in thinking about the selections. Though every teacher will develop unique approaches, and I have no doubt that a Native teacher will approach many of these selections very differently from a non-Native teacher, the introductions present some ideas. For most classroom teachers, Native literature was not even alluded to in their Language Arts methodology courses.

As I was compiling this book, I had the Manitoba Grades VII-XII Language Arts curriculum before me at all times. You can open the documents at random and pick any topic. Our Bit of Truth can be used to teach the skills with the exception of a book-length drama. For the novels, it would, of course, be necessary to get the texts.

Though drama is not included, many of the items in this book lend themselves admirably to dramatization because traditional Native literature was dramatic. It was not "read" by individuals, the way we treat literature now. It was a performance with teller and audience participation.

Some selections, like Darlene Genaille's poem "Prejudice Hurts"[21] immediately suggest dialogue. It would only take minutes to re-write Hubert Gunn's "A Question of Rights"[22] into play format.

I am not going to dwell on curriculum content to any extent but just want to mention an item from the Manitoba Middle Years Curriculum: Differentiating Teaching of Various Grade Levels.

DIFFERENTIATING TEACHING OF VARIOUS GRADE LEVELS

GRADE	Genre	Text Selected (difficulty considered)	(Interpretation) Depth of Involvement	Elements	Concreteness Abstractness	Emotional Response	Relationship to Writing and Other Integration
5	stories (fiction & novel) non-fiction poetry play informational	e.g., "Owls in the Family"	experience: - broadening interests and creating new ones	expose to: - plot - setting discuss: - character - story line	word play intuitive understanding	like enjoy	sensory description
6	plus full length play	e.g., "Tom Sawyer," "Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle"	identify: - broadening & creating - interpret meanings major genre	identify: - plot - setting describe: - story line - character	labelling events true stories infer and interpret	identify didactic purpose	
7	plus short story	e.g., "The Incredible Journey"	identify, describe and deepen interests beyond the story line	expose to: - style - theme discuss: - plot - setting	- invented stories - symbolism - fuller understanding of literal & inferred meaning	express emotions	
8	plus essay	e.g., "The Chrysalids," "Day of the Triffids"	describe and apply: - deepening interests - understanding of human nature and self	expose to: - tone - mood discuss: - style - theme describe: - plot - setting	- projecting beyond reality; e.g., science fiction - hidden meanings	- empathize - comment on evocative power	associations and inference

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The various genre are listed with suggested grade levels up to Grade 8 and across the page are the categories:

Text Selected (difficulty considered)

Interpretation: depth of involvement

Elements

Concreteness/Abstractness

Emotional response

Relationship to Writing and Other Integration.[23]

As you go through this chart different selections in Our Bit of Truth come to mind immediately. There are short stories for all the elements of fiction, myths and legends for depth of involvement or concreteness and abstractness, poetry such as Lee Maracle's for evocative power or the careful descriptions of a writer like Louis Goulet for didactic purposes. It's all there.

I am not suggesting that this book be used as the only Language Arts text, because surely Native students should be exposed to literature from other groups as well. Native literature does not challenge the style and content of masterpieces from European culture, but it does offer an alternative way of thinking and it can add new dimensions to existing thought patterns.

For non-Native readers beliefs and customs may be unfamiliar but they will recognize the strength, beauty and common themes of the literature. For aboriginal readers, the literature may be an unprecedented source of strength and an avenue for personal development that has not been utilized to its fullest potential yet.[24]

Recently one reviewer was rather critical of this book--not

because of the selections in it but because of the selections not in it. Isn't that wonderful? Here we already have 347 pages of Native literature and there is still more out there! I hope your students get hooked, both on reading other Native writers and on writing their own literature.

I'd like to conclude with Eva McKay's words, words that are addressed to all educators:

> We are asking now that you will come and learn from us. We are here.[25]

NOTES

1. Agnes Grant, Using Children's Literature to Teach Reading to Indian and Metis Students, Unpublished Masters Thesis, (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba, 1976), 7.
2. Agnes Grant, Monographs in Education XV: Native Literature in the Curriculum, (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba, 1986) p.5.
3. O.I.S.E., The Circle Program, (Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1985).
4. John McInnes, Barbara Burnaby, Linda Guebert, Mary Upper, Joan Speares and Kathy Hill, The Circle Program: Lots to Do, (Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1985). pp.35-48.
5. Mary Upper, Linda Guebert, John McInnes and Barbara Burnaby, The Circle Program: Rosie's Feast. (Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1985).
6. Agnes Grant, (ed.) Our Bit of Truth: An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature, (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1990) p.315.
7. Ibid, pp. 7-26.
8. ibid, pp. 152-158.
9. Ibid, pp. 198-205.
10. Ibid, p. 113-114.
11. Ibid, p. 114.
12. Ibid, pp. 142-144.
13. Ibid, pp. 145-147.
14. Ibid, pp. 159-164.
15. Ibid, p. 142.
16. Ibid, pp. 229-231.

17. Ibid. pp. 261-267.

18. Ibid, pp. 239-240.

19. Ibid, pp. 244-246.

20. Ibid, p. 335.

21. Ibid, pp. 332-334.

22. Ibid, pp. 231-234.

23. Manitoba Department of Education, English Language Arts: Middle Years, 1982. p. 161.

24. Agnes Grant, Monograpgh in Education IV, p.8.

25. Agnes Grant, (ed.) Our Bit of Truth, p.347.

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